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SUBJECT: PANAMA: INTERNAL RULING-PARTY DYNAMICS AS JOSTLING
FOR 2009 ELECTIONS BEGINS -- PART III: THE VEEPS

REF: A. PANAMA 0502
B. PANAMA 0525

¶1. (U) "The Veeps" is Part III in a three-part series on
Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) inner dynamics.
Part I: The Front Runners (reftel A).
Part II: The Unwanted One (reftel B).

SUMMARY

¶2. (SBU) The PRD's vice presidential candidate in 2009 is
likely to be Balbina Herrera or Hector Aleman, both of them
cabinet members, founding members of the Democratic
Revolutionary party (PRD), locally-educated, self-made but
experienced politicians with populist, anti-USG backgrounds.
Herrera (Minister of Housing) and Aleman (Minister of
Government and Justice) are discretely but aggressively
positioning themselves for winning an invitation from the
PRD's presidential candidate invitation to join him on the
ticket. A former three-term legislator, Balbina Herrera (52)
is a former anti-U.S. firebrand who was directly involved in
the riot that spoiled President George Bush's visit to Panama
in 1992. These days, Herrera is a "moderate," admits past
mistakes and says she has "grown up" politically. Hector
Aleman (48) was a public employee union activist who led
anti-U.S. demonstrations under the military regime. Both
Herrera and Aleman are good Embassy contacts. End summary.

The Minister of Housing

¶3. (SBU) In addition to being Minister of Housing, Balbina
Herrera is the PRD's deputy secretary general (number-two in
the party to President Torrijos). A legislator for fifteen
years (since 1990), Herrera became Panama's first female
National Assembly president in 1995. Herrera held the
largely ceremonial PRD presidency during 1999-2002. Well
known for her fiery rhetoric and combative style (and for her
former anti-U.S. activism), Herrera decided not to run for
re-election to the National Assembly in 2004 and diligently
supported President Torrijos's successful campaign. A PRD
member since 1978 and once closely associated with Manuel
Noriega, Herrera held numerous PRD leadership positions
before serving in the legislature, as mayor of San Miguelito
(1984-89) and president of the Mayors' Association (1985-88).

Most Popular

¶4. (SBU) Local polls show Herrera as Panama's most popular cabinet member. (Comment: We have watched people stop, call her name, even scream when they see her in the street. End comment.) Since taking office as housing minister in September 2004, Herrera has fully dedicated herself to housing poor Panamanians. PRD legislators have confided to Emboff that Herrera discretely meets regularly with three other traditional and influential PRDers to analyze current situations and evaluate President Torrijos's performance.

Charisma and Clout

¶5. (SBU) Herrera's vice presidential aspirations are widely known. Herrera has expanded her traditional base of supporters in San Miguelito, an impoverished over-crowded district within Panama City, through her work on national housing projects and through internal work as a PRD leader. Likewise, Herrera appears in the media constantly as a charismatic politician with strong convictions. During the 2004 campaign Herrera's was the principal voice on radio and TV shows defending the PRD and Torrijos from opposition attacks. Many believe that Herrera will use all of her influence and political clout to persuade the PRD presidential candidate to nominate her as his vice president.

If Torrijos maintains control of the PRD after the 2007 internal elections, Herrera will need Torrijos's blessing for her aspirations. One major obstacle could be her rocky relationship with the First Lady Vivian Torrijos, who is known to strongly influence her husband.

The Minister of Government and Justice

¶6. (SBU) Hector Aleman is an up-and-coming politician who emphasizes the importance of continuing democratization within his party and the country as a whole. Like Balbina Herrera, Aleman's aspirations to become a vice presidential candidate under the PRD ticket are no secret. Although he is an elected official (legislator), Aleman's poker-face air and lack of charisma may not make him an appealing national candidate, especially among younger voters, who make up the majority of the electorate. There are rumors that Aleman may eventually replace VP/Foreign Minister Lewis. The rumors are somewhat odd, considering Aleman's lack of international experience. Also, Aleman does not speak English. If he did become foreign minister, travel demands might prevent him from internal campaigning.

Up-And-Coming Politico

¶7. (SBU) Aleman has served as Minister of Government and Justice since September 1, 2004. In addition to his cabinet post, Aleman is the PRD's Second Deputy Secretary General and served as Torrijos campaign coordinator for the May 2004 presidential race. He was a driving force behind the National Assembly's approval of the PRD-sponsored constitutional reform package passed in 2004 and ratified in ¶2005. Although re-elected as legislator representing a district in Panama City, Aleman is on leave while he serves as minister and rumors are that he will not return to the Assembly unless he loses his cabinet post.

Good Contacts With Embassy, China

¶8. (SBU) A member of Martin Torrijos's &new8 PRD, Aleman has worked closely with Embassy officials since taking office but in the past he was known for taking anti-American positions. On the other hand, in FY 2002 and again in FY 2003, Aleman declined to participate in several International Visitor (IV) programs, alleging National Assembly and Party obligations. As Minister of Government and Justice, Aleman has cooperated with the Embassy. Aleman supports establishing full diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and withdrawing the GOP's recognition of Taiwan. Aleman has visited the PRC, has close ties to the

PRC's local Commercial Development Office and even boycotted the visit of Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian to the National Assembly a few years ago when the PRD controlled it during the Moscoso administration.

Dubious Reputation As A Political "Fixer"

19. (SBU) President Torrijos has relied on Aleman for political damage control for social security reforms and for his help in charting a political strategy to guide the conclusion of an FTA with the United States. Many PRDers blame Aleman for the GOP's mishandling of the social security reform bill in 2005 and the subsequent five-week street demonstrations and strike by construction workers, public physicians, nurses and public teachers.

Comment

110. (SBU) Herrera is probably better placed within the party than Aleman for the vice presidential nomination. She is charismatic; he is not. She is charming; he is not. She is more at ease with the media than Aleman. Most important, PRDers are not blaming her for the government's political mistakes. Potential presidential candidate (Panama City mayor) Juan Carlos Navarro would not hesitate to name Herrera his vice president. On the other hand, Aleman is closer to potential candidate (VP/Foreign Minister) Samuel Lewis. At the moment, Lewis looks like a better bet for the nomination than Navarro, mainly because he is closer to Torrijos. So, in the end, Aleman may have better chances than Herrera to get President Torrijos, blessing to become the PRD's vice presidential candidate.

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